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From: Smith, Bonnie
Sent: Wed 1/22/2014 6:37:19 PM
Subject: Media Groups Demand To Know More, Sooner From Agencies After West Virginia Spill

From: Jones, Enesta
Sent: Wednesday, January 22, 2014 11:14:13 AM
To: Deitz, Randy; duteau, helen; Cohen, Nancy; Thomas, Latosha; Smith, Bonnie; White, Terri-A
Subject: FYI: Media Groups Demand To Know More, Sooner From Agencies After West Virginia Spill

Media Groups Demand To Know More, Sooner From Agencies After West Virginia Spill
The Huffington Post | By Nick Visser Posted: 01/21/2014 5:14 pm EST | Updated: 01/22/2014 2:23 am EST

The Society of Environmental Journalists and Society of Professional Journalists are unhappy with the West Virginia chemical spill -- not just because 300,000 people were left without drinking water, but because government agencies refused to provide timely information about the leak to the public. The groups sent a strongly worded letter to the heads of the Environmental Protection Agency and Centers for Disease Control and Prevention on Tuesday, criticizing what they call a "lack of openness" from government officials about the cause of the spill and ongoing cleanup efforts. In crises like these, it's imperative for government and those entrusted with the public's welfare to inform people promptly and continually about what they know -- and what they don't. Too often, in the interest of preventing panic or confusion, government agencies clamp down on their communication with the news media and the public. As happened in this case, a parsimonious public-affairs strategy all too often backfires, feeding people's fear and distrust of government. [...]

Even though the worst of the West Virginia emergency is past, questions about government credibility linger. Unless responsible agencies correct the transparency errors they have committed during this and previous emergencies, the problem will fester and worsen. The CDC did not return a request for comment, and a request for comment was left with the EPA in Washington, D.C., where offices were closed Tuesday due to the snow. Hundreds of thousands of people were given orders not to use water for bathing or drinking earlier this month after 7,500 gallons of a coal-processing chemical spilled into West Virginia's Elk River. The leak exposed troubling vulnerabilities in the water supply and led many residents to question why they didn't know about the potential dangers in their own backyards. SEJ and SPJ point to disturbing cases of public officials ducking the media for days after the spill was first reported on Jan. 9, issuing canned responses that were "woefully inadequate." The EPA waited nearly a week before a regional administrator commented on the spill. Both groups have called for greater access to public information officers, availability of informed officials to give on-the-record interviews and documentary evidence to support official statements, among other requests.

Read the letter in full below:
Disclosure: HuffPost Senior Environmental reporter Kate Sheppard, whose reporting is referenced in both this story and in the letter, is an active board member of SEJ.